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National Role in Turkish Foreign Policy: Relations with Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq

Abstract

Turkey's foreign policy has been in a state of change since the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government came into power in 2002. Regarding the internal and external factors, this article argues that the changes in identification national role have been one the factors that led Turkey to conduct a new pro-active foreign policy. Turkey has perceived duties and/or responsibilities for itself in its relations with other states in the regions to which Turkey feels deep-rooted historical, cultural and religious ties. The outcomes of this change have been observable in the relations between Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north of Iraq, which evolved from conflictual to cooperative relations since 2008.

Keywords: Turkey, Foreign Policy, Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, Turkey and Iraq, national role

Since the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government came into power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has been in a state of change. These changes triggered the debate over whether objective material interests or ideas and perceptions are decisive on Turkish foreign policy. Since the AKP officials have always reiterated that the main determinant of Turkish foreign policy has been national interests, the changes in foreign policy behavior also require looking at the role of policymakers and their perception in decision-making process. In this respect, the emphasis of being a *central country* and a regional leader, which became an important part of national role, led Turkey to implement more cooperative foreign policy behavior. In accordance with this national role, Turkey has perceived duties and/or responsibilities for itself in its relations with other states in the regions to which Turkey feels deep-rooted historical, cultural and religious ties. The outcomes of this change have been observable in the relations between Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north of Iraq, which evolved from conflictual to cooperative relations since 2008. Turkey has declared in every occasion that it supports Iraq sovereignty, stability, political unity and territorial integrity. In addition, Turkey has also been engaged with the KRG of Iraq in order to seek ways for cooperation, which ranges from enhancing economic relations to collaborate against PKK that has main base in the Kandil Mountains in the north of Iraq.

This article analyzes the evolution of Turkey's relations with the KRG in order to understand the roots of how friendly relations have been constructed in a turbulent region. Regarding continuities and changes in the relations, both internal and external factors will be examined. It is observed that on the one hand, the

foreign policy principles of the AKP government, which has mainly constructed by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, influenced Turkey's new approach; on the other hand, the external factors occurred in the post-Saddam era paved the way for close relations between Turkey and the KRG.

Changes in Turkish foreign policy in the last decade are partly the result of re-definition of national role in the dynamic domestic and regional contexts. In the post-Iraqi War of 2003, regional reconstruction process led Turkey to re-define its role on the basis of being a leading country, so the establishment of cooperative relations in order to ensure regional security and stability became a priority in its foreign policy. The influence of national role in Turkish foreign policy behavior can easily be seen at the evolution of Turkey's relations with the KRG. While the bilateral relations were quite conflictual until 2008, since then both sides have been seeking for cooperation in both political and economic arenas.

National Role Conception in Turkish Foreign Policy: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

The *national role* approach to foreign policy analysis is a complementary method to understand foreign policy behavior of a state, which is not only influenced by the system, but also by identities, roles and norms. Since the analysis of a national role conception in foreign policy analysis is not within the scope of this article, it is sufficient to note here that a national role conception highly influences a country's foreign policy behavior. Since policymakers construct national roles, taking into account national interests, goals, identities, geography, capability and socio-economic features, they also decide on a foreign policy behavior in accordance with national roles. According to Holsti, *„A national role conception includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in the subordinate regional systems.”*¹ In other words, it is the image of policymakers of the appropriate foreign policy behavior of states towards or within the system. According to Holsti, a national role leads policymakers either to be active in the system through certain functions or commitments, or to be inactive.² In this regard, the different perspectives in Turkish foreign policy towards the KRG, which are named as a *„realist-exclusivist approach”* and a *„liberal-integrationist approach,”*³ can be seen through the lens of a national role concept.

By the late of 1990s, Turkey's national role suggested it to be more active in the regions that had traditionally been ignored by the elites. When İsmail Cem became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1997, he reoriented Turkish foreign policy. Cem viewed the promises of former Foreign Ministers to maintain traditional

¹ K. J. HOLSTI, *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 14, No. 3, (September 1970), 245-246.

² Ibid, 254.

³ Tarık OĞUZLU, *Turkey's Northern Iraq Policy: Competing Perspectives*, Insight Turkey, Vol. 10, N° 3, (2008), 10.

Turkish foreign policy as guarantees that Turkey would take a hands-off approach to regional issues, distancing itself from its historical geography.⁴ Criticizing traditional Turkish foreign policy for being bereft of its historical dimension and trapped between „*European versus Asian*” and „*West versus East*,” Cem introduced a foreign policy approach that included the concepts of *depth*, with respect to time, and *breadth*, with respect to space.⁵ He also noted the role of culture in any country’s foreign policy, saying, „*in the development of any policy – particularly in the shaping of foreign policy – a nation’s culture and its self-perception are fundamental elements.*”⁶ According to him, ruling elites had narrowed Turkey’s culture such that achievements inherited from previous historical periods were practically non-existent. Turkey’s foreign policy towards Islamist states was thus negatively impacted by the cultural prejudices of the governing elites.⁷ Cem’s foreign policy approach, in contrast, systematically mobilized these historical and cultural assets in order to improve Turkey’s economic and political relations with countries in the Balkans and Middle East that shared a common Ottoman past.⁸

As a continuation of Cem’s foreign policy approach, the multi-dimensional and pro-active foreign policy, zero-problems with neighbors and the balance of security and democracy became the main principles of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule.⁹ Like İsmail Cem, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who became Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, following a period as chief advisor to the Prime Minister, played a significant role in constructing Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu introduced the concept of *strategic depth*, which has two main components; the first is *historical depth* and the second is *geographical depth*. Davutoğlu argues that *historical depth*, an assessment of the links between the past, present and future, and *geographical depth*, an outcome determined by relations between domestic, regional and global factors, should be taken into account in order to formulate a lasting strategic perspective.¹⁰ According to him, Turkey’s position should be redefined in terms of its geographical position and historical assets. Turkey has generally been presented as a bridge between East and West or a model for the Muslim world. Davutoğlu questioned this designation. He advocates instead a view of Turkey as a central country in its own region,¹¹ stating,

It [Turkey] is both an Asian and European country and is also close to Africa

⁴ İsmail CEM, *Turkey in the New Century* 2nd Edition, Rustem Bookshop Mersin, 2001, 4.

⁵ Ibid, 2-4.

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı*, Radikal, 26 Şubat 2004.

¹⁰ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, Insight Turkey 10, N° 1, 2008, 80. For more detailed information on Davutoğlu’s foreign policy vision, see: Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, Stratejik DERİNLİK, *Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu*, 23rd Edition, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2007.

¹¹ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Türkiye Merkez Ülke Olmalı*, Radikal, 26 Şubat 2004.

*through the Eastern Mediterranean. A central country with such an optimal geographic location cannot define itself in a defensive manner. It should be seen neither as a bridge country, which only connects two points, nor a frontier country, nor indeed as an ordinary country, which sits at the edge of the Muslim world or the West.*¹²

Moreover, the cultural geography of Turkey harmonizes elements from Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East. Davutoğlu thus advocates a new diplomatic style for Turkey that does not reduce multiple identities into a unified character or a single region. In accordance with the multi-dimensional approach, Turkey actively involved itself in regional affairs in order to ensure a secure neighborhood.

In this context, Turkey assumed itself a leading country role that „works to expand the sphere of peace and prosperity in its region; generate stability and security; help establish an order that paves the way for prosperity, human development and lasting stability.”¹³ As a part of a multidimensional approach and active engagement with all regional systems in Turkey’s neighborhood, „zero-problems with neighbors” became another tenet of the AKP’s foreign policy. To that end, Davutoğlu announced that Turkey’s foreign policy vision had become more region-oriented in order to be able to deal with questions around Turkey in a systematic manner.¹⁴ In addition, he declared Turkey had a new role that dictated it to provide security and stability not only for itself, but also for its neighboring regions.¹⁵ According to AKP officials this was consistent with Turkey’s traditional foreign policy premise: „peace at home, peace in the world,” with new elements resulting from the end of the Cold War. These new elements did not contradict the fundamental values and interests of the Euro-Atlantic community. In this regard, Davutoğlu thus asserted, „Turkey should guarantee its own security and stability by taking on a more active, constructive role to provide order, stability and security in its environs.”¹⁶

The improvement of Turkey’s relations with the KRG can be seen within the framework of aforementioned Turkey’s self-perception and role. Ankara realized that the war in Iraq created changes in regional politics, which cannot be wished away ignoring Iraqi Kurds and the regional government in the north of Iraq. Therefore, as a part of its attempt to act as a balancer among different Iraqi groups and a facilitator between the US officials and Iraqi Sunni resister, Turkey’s relations with Iraqi Kurds have also been improving. In this respect, Turkey started to emphasize win-win approach in its relations with the KRG, rather than win-lose one.

¹² Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, Insight Turkey 10, N^o 1, 2008, 78.

¹³ *Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy*, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa> (Accessed 9 February 2013).

¹⁴ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Turkey in 2008*, a discussion hosted by the Henry Jackson Society and Bob Laxton MP, 11 June 2008.

¹⁵ Ahmet DAVUTOĞLU, *Turkey’s Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007*, Insight Turkey 10, N^o 1, 2008, 79.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Moreover, it seems that Ankara desires to increase dependence of the KRG on Turkey as a strategy to reduce possible threats that would come from this region to Turkey.¹⁷ It should also be noted here that even though the motivations of KRG are different from Turkey, it also prefers to establish cooperative relations. Massoud Barzani, President of the KRG, mentioned mutual benefits of cooperation, indicating unity among European countries in the post-war years.¹⁸ In this framework, following the decision of National Security Council in 2008 about the establishment of dialogue with all elements of Iraqi politics in order to promote Turkey's economic, energy and strategic interests in Iraq, Turkey's relations with the KRG has been developing. In this context, Murat Özçelik, who was Turkey's Special Envoy for Iraq, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was Prime Minister's Chief Foreign Policy Advisor, met with Barzani in Baghdad. This meeting was seen as a first signal of a new era in the relations between Turkey and the KRG because this was the first high-level contact between Turkish officials and the KRG officials.

The re-election of AKP in 2007 consolidated its power that led it to act boldly not only in internal politics, but also in international politics. Contrary to traditional policies, the AKP government has attempted to separate the terror problem caused by the PKK from the cultural, social and economic demands of its Kurdish citizens, aiming to resolve the Kurdish issue. In the summer of 2009, the AKP government launched an initiative first called the „*Kurdish opening*,” then renamed a „*democratic opening*” so as to apply to other groups, including non-Muslims, Alevis and Romans. According to the AKP government, the aim of these initiatives was to strengthen social unity in Turkey through democratization.¹⁹ For this purpose, Turkey's first official Kurdish-language television channel was established, and the government called for the establishment of Kurdish literature departments at state universities. These initiatives also facilitated the acceptability of a „*liberal-integrationist approach*” towards the KRG.

The implementation of this policy, labeled as aiming to *balance security and democracy*, has also had repercussions in Turkey's foreign policy, especially towards the north of Iraq. Like balancing security and democracy in internal politics, Turkey started to make an effort to balance security and economy in international politics. In accordance with the latter, Turkey once again became throttle of Kurdish entity by improving its economic ties and providing its geographical support to the Kurdish entity to integrate with the world, as mentioned by Nevzat Hadi, governor of Arbil.²⁰ The opening of a Turkish consulate in Arbil contributed positively to this rapprochement process.

¹⁷ Fikret BİLA, *Kuzey Irak'taki Çelişki*, Milliyet, 28 Şubat 2007.

¹⁸ Interview with Massoud Barzani by Mete ÇUBUKÇU, *Barzani: Barışı Sabote Etmeye Çalışıyorlar*, NTVMSNBC, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25030008> 9 December 2009 (Accessed 1 February 2013).

¹⁹ *The Democratic Opening Project with Questions and Answers: The National Brotherhood Project*, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/acilim220110.pdf> (Accessed 3 May 2012)

²⁰ *Erbil Valisi Nevzat Hadi, Kürtlerin İlişkilerinde Eğilim Türkiye'ye Doğrudur*, Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM), 13 May 2010 <http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/orsamkonukgoster.aspx?ID=157> (Accessed 5 January 2013).

Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: From a „Realist-Exclusionist” to a „Liberal-Integrationist” Approach

Historically, the presence of PKK in the north of Iraq, the political demands of Iraqi Kurds and the issues related with the security of Turkmen's rights in the north of Iraq, had created serious tension between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish authority. In this framework, Turkey's relations with the Kurdish authorities had always been security-oriented and continued with ups and downs. By the Iraq War in 2003, however, mainly two different views appeared regarding Turkey's approach towards the north of Iraq. On the one hand, the „*realist-exclusionist approach*” maintains security-oriented views.²¹ According to this view, Turkey's fight against the PKK terrorism would not reach to a successful end unless the KRG stops to turn a blind eye to the presence of PKK in the north of Iraq. In addition, this view advocates that the possibility of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq, which is a real threat to Turkey, should not be ignored, especially after the political gains of Iraqi Kurds by the Constitution. Lastly, it sees liberal approach as a double-edged sword, which would also re-awaken Kurdish nationalism as a result of gaining economic power. Therefore, Turkey should be careful while conducting a liberal approach towards the north of Iraq. In other words, it argues that while Turkey is planning to preserve territorial integrity of Iraq through establishing mutual economic interdependence with the KRG, Turkey can also serve to the KRG to gain economic development, which could create opportunities to declare independency. On the other hand, the „*liberal-integrationist approach*” supports the engagement with the north of Iraq.²² According to this view, Turkey does not need to fear Iraqi Kurds, if it conducts liberal-democratic policies. By this way, Turkey can increase the loyalty of its own Kurdish citizens to the state improving their well-being; can consolidate the need of the KRG to Turkey rising mutual interdependence and can help to preserve the integrity of Iraq.

In the aftermath of the Iraq War, the „*realist-exclusionist approach*” maintained its influence in Turkish foreign policy towards the north of Iraq due to the political gains of the KRG which officially became a federated region by the Iraqi Constitution, the increasing terrorist attacks of the PKK and the resistance of the US to Turkish military operations in the north of Iraq.

As seen, the external factors played an important role for Turkey to conduct a „*realist-exclusionist approach*” towards the north of Iraq. In this framework, Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurds cannot be studied in isolation from Turkish-American relations and the consequences of Iraq War in 2003. Although Turkey and the US have been allied in various fields, the Iraq War highlighted their

²¹ Tarık OĞUZLU, *Turkey's Northern Iraq Policy: Competing Perspectives*, Insight Turkey, Vol. 10, N° 3, 2008, 14-17.

²² Ibid.

contradictory interests. In the preliminary stages of the war, leaders of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) and the US senior officials held discussions from which Turkey was excluded. Then, on 1 March 2003, the Turkish parliament voted not to grant permission to US troops to use its air bases and launch its ground offensive from its soil, and in so doing, forfeited its opportunity to take part in the reconstruction of Iraq. On 4 July 2003, US forces arrested Turkish special operation troops in Suleymaniyah on charges of conspiring to assassinate the governor of Kirkuk.²³ This episode was interpreted as a clear sign that the United States favored Iraqi Kurds over its strategic partner, Turkey.²⁴

Unlike Turkey, Iraqi Kurds welcomed the US invasion of Iraq and cooperated with its officials. These close relations entitled the Kurds to participate in Iraqi politics on equal footing with Iraqi Arabs for the first time. Kurdish demands for substantial autonomy in and beyond the mainly Kurdish region in the north of Iraq before drafting a constitution alarmed Turkey. The constitution recognized the Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as a legal region²⁵ with the power to amend laws not under federal purview, to maintain internal security forces and to establish representatives abroad.²⁶ It also approved Kurdish as an official language, alongside Arabic.²⁷ This development reinforced Turkish concerns over US-backed Kurdish autonomy in the north of Iraq.

From the Turkish perspective, the disintegration of Iraq would most likely result in the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq and this would trigger separatist demands among its own Kurdish citizens,²⁸ backed by some regional and extra-regional countries that would benefit from such a development. This perception had been one of the main reasons of Turkey's tense relations with Iraqi Kurdish authorities. The political vacuum in the north of Iraq after the collapse of the Saddam regime created opportunities for Iraqi Kurds to expand their political and economic power. In this context, Massoud Barzani deepened Turkey's concerns, stating, „*When the right time comes, an independent Kurdish state will be a reality.*”²⁹ As a result, the expansion of power of Iraqi Kurds and the deterioration of Turkish-American relations became a basis for the proponents of „*realist-exclusionist approach.*”

In the meantime, the increasing terrorist attacks of PKK also caused to tense relations with the US, Iraq and also the KRG. The increasing attacks reinforced the perception in Turkey that the mountains of the north of Iraq remained a safe haven for the PKK due to the policies of the United States in the post-Saddam era.

²³ Derya SAZAK, *Kuzey Irak Baskını*, Milliyet, 6 Temmuz 2003.

²⁴ Taha AKYOL, *ABD Kimin Müttefikleri?*, Milliyet, 8 Temmuz 2003; Hüsnü MAHALLI, *Çirkin Amerikalı*, Yeni Şafak, 6 Haziran 2003.

²⁵ Iraqi Constitution, Article 117.

²⁶ Iraqi Constitution, Article 121.

²⁷ Iraqi Constitution, Article 4.

²⁸ Fikret BILA, *Barzani'nin Hedefi Bağdat Değil, Güneydoğu*, Milliyet, 13 Aralık 2005.

²⁹ *Barzani: Kurdish State Inevitable*, Hürriyet Daily News, 4 February 2005.

Turkey noticed that its alliance with the United States did not put an end to the PKK presence in the north of Iraq.³⁰ In autumn 2003, Washington agreed to take measures against the PKK presence in the north of Iraq on behalf of Ankara, but Turkey saw no evidence. At the beginning of 2004, Deputy Head of the Turkish Armed Forces General İlker Başbuğ stated that „*the US's fight against the PKK is not meeting our [Turkey's] expectation.*”³¹ A year later, the general reminded the US that Turkey was waiting for concrete steps to be taken, stating „*on this subject, we are not at the same point as the United States. The PKK's political and ideological supports must be cut, their leaders and members must be arrested, their financial and logistic supports must be cut, and their command control system must be cut.*”³² In the meantime, the increasing terrorist activities of the PKK, coupled with US opposition to Turkey's military operations in Iraqi territory, obligated Turkey to search for ways to cooperate with the United States and Iraqi governments. The result was a tripartite mechanism, and in 2006, Ankara appointed retired general Edip Başer, while Washington appointed retired general Joseph Ralston as special envoys in meetings about the PKK. However, Turkey was disappointed by the apparent hesitation of the US occupational forces to take action against the PKK. When Washington, Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurds offered an envoy from the autonomous Kurdish authority to the process, the talks became deadlocked. Turkey announced that it would not accept the envoy as long as the Kurdish authority continued to back the PKK. As a result, Edip Başer resigned in February 2007.

As with the US government, the Iraqi government did nothing to counter the presence of the PKK in the north of Iraq. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül mentioned, „*The saddening point here is that while Turkey has done everything it could to ensure security, prosperity, and stability in Iraq, Iraqi authorities have not shown any effort to prevent PKK activities from taking place on their own soil.*”³³ Therefore, all these factors caused to the maintenance of the „*realist-exclusivist approach*” in Turkish foreign policy towards the north of Iraq.

The turning point in both Turkish-American and Turkish-KRG relations happened in the aftermath of 2007. Regarding Turkish-American relations, the visit of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Washington in November 2007 opened a new phase. After this meeting, US supported Turkish struggle against PKK, opening up the north of Iraq's airspace for Turkey's operations and providing real-time intelligence against the PKK targets. In addition, a shift in Turkish foreign

³⁰ Rasim Özgür DÖNMEZ and Pınar ENNELİ, *The Changing Logic of Political Violence: The Case of the PKK in Turkey after the Invasion of Iraq – Violence for Violence's Sake*, in Marika GUGGISBERG and David WEIR (eds.) *Understanding Violence: Contexts and Portrayals*, Inter-disciplinary Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2009, 125.

³¹ Genelkurmay'dan Açıklama: İncirlik'in Kullanımı Uygun Buluyoruz, Milliyet, 16 Ocak 2004.

³² “General BAŞBUĞ: We are Waiting for Concrete Steps from the US on the PKK Matter, Hürriyet Daily News, 7 June 2005.

³³ FM Abdullah Gül: We are Witnessing an Increase in PKK Activities, Hürriyet Daily News, 15 June 2007.

policy behavior towards the KRG became apparent. On the one hand, Turkey continued to launch air operations on the PKK camps in the north of Iraq. On the other hand, Turkey attempted to act as a central country attentively following and actively involving in regional affairs, especially in the north of Iraq. Put another way, both the internal and external factors created the changes in the relations between Turkey and the KRG. Internally, the political strength of AKP after the 2007 election led it to conduct boldly its foreign policy principles, which mainly support the use of soft power and engagement with states and non-state actors in seeking solutions for security issues. Externally, the changes created by the Iraq War led Turkey to establish stable and good relations with the KRG. As a result, the proponents of the „*liberal-integrationist approach*” have gained the upper hand in the debate of Turkey’s relations with the KRG since 2008. Therefore, the following part will focus on both political and economic relations in which the changes of the dominant approach in Turkish foreign policy from a „*realist-exclusionist approach*” to a „*liberal-integrationist approach*” can easily be observed. In accordance with the latter, Turkey’s policies towards the KRG have been softening that led both sides to conduct high-level official contact, searching ways for political cooperation and developing economic ties.

The first signals of improving relations between Turkey and the KRG were seen in the changes of the discourses of officials and their mutual perceptions. Just as Ankara views Iraqi Turkmens as the relatives of Turkish people, the same approach started to be applied to the Iraqi Kurds, treating them as members of the family. The statement of President Abdullah Gül, who mentioned both Iraqi Kurds and Turkmens are beloved relatives of Turkey, demonstrated the changes in Turkey’s treatment.³⁴ In the following years, Turkey deepened its political and economic ties with the north of Iraq. The visit of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Zafer Çağlayan, Minister of Industry and Commerce, to Arbil was also perceived as a sign of the coming „*spring*” in the relations between Turkey and the KRG.³⁵ In that regard, Rebwar Karim Vali, editor-in-chief of a Kurdish journal, Hewler Post, mentioned the rapprochement process in the relations with Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds by which it is supposed to consolidate Turkish and Kurdish collective strategic perspective in the region.³⁶ In this context, the perception of Iraqi Kurdish authority has changed as well. While they had perceived Turkey as a strong block in front of their federated state, now they see Turkey as a „*task force for the socio-economic development of Iraqi Kurdish region*.”³⁷ In this framework, the easing tension over the Kirkuk issue will be analyzed later in detail because it is a good case to see the influence of external factors that worked for the changes in mutual perceptions and Turkey’s approach towards the KRG.

³⁴ GÜL: *Türkmenler de Kürtler de Akrabamız*, Sabah, 14 Ocak 2007.

³⁵ Mete ÇUBUKÇU, *Kuzey Irak Şimdi Barzani’ye Ankara Daveti Bekliyor*, Referans, 3 Kasım 2009.

³⁶ Mete ÇUBUKÇU, *Barzani’nin Ziyareti Iraklı Kürtlerle Yeni Bir Sayfa Açacak*, Referans, 6 Mayıs 2010.

³⁷ Selen Tonuş Kareem, *Interview with Haydar Mustafa Said*, Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government’s Official, Ortadoğu Analiz, Cilt 4, Mart 2012, 23-24.

It is also certain that Turkey has successfully involved in the north of Iraq in economic terms, which will also be discussed later in detail. Another significant sign of both sides' efforts to improve relations is seen in the banking and transportation projects. As mentioned by Siyawesh Ayyo, Minister of Transport of the KRG, Turkey and the KRG are working on to connect Arbil, Suleymaniya and Dohuk to Turkey via rail line.³⁸ Although these projects need time to be accomplished, they demonstrate the willingness of both sides to improve and deepen their relations. In addition, Turkish bank branches, namely Türkiye İş Bankası, Vakıfbank, Ziraat Bankası and Albaraka-Türk, have already been opened in Arbil.

Easing Tension over the Kirkuk Issue

Turkey has always expressed its sensitivity towards Kirkuk. Like neighboring other countries, the primary concern of Turkey is the nationalist ambitions of Iraqi Kurds. Since Kirkuk is claimed by Iraqi Kurdish leaders as the „*Kurdish Jerusalem*” and perceived as the political and economic hub of any future independent Kurdish state, Osman Korutürk, who was Turkey's special envoy for Iraq, stated that „*Kirkuk is not only an internal business for Iraq; it concerns its neighbors as well.*”³⁹ Therefore, the preservation of Turkmen identity of the city has been seen important for Turkey to secure territorial integrity of Iraq.

In February 2003, Ankara and Washington reached an agreement on Kirkuk that suggested not letting any armed force in Kirkuk other than the US troops. However, just after the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, peshmergas of KDP and PUK entered in Kirkuk along with the US troops and started to damage historical, cultural and demographic feature of the city. Then, Turkish authorities expressed their concerns and Abdullah Gül, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs, called US Secretary of State Collin Powel to preserve Turkey's interests as was promised. Contrary to Turkish demand, the United States and KDP and PUK signed a memorandum on 17 May 2003 that provided the presence of peshmergas in Kirkuk in the name of helping the US forces in fight against terrorists. In this way, Kurds took control of Kirkuk and Kurdified the city through settling the Kurdish population from other regions, even from neighboring countries. As a result of the migrations, the Kurdish population in Kirkuk increased disproportionately. In addition, Kurdish control of Kirkuk spread to political areas as getting power in 23 of 24 Directorates of Service in the Kirkuk provincial council.

In the insecure environment throughout the country, the Iraqi Constitution was approved by a controversial referendum on 15 October 2005. Article 140 of Constitution suggested a road map for Kirkuk that foresees to have a referendum until 31 December 2007, after the necessary measures, normalization and census⁴⁰, have been completed. However, the lack of political consensus and the

³⁸ *Türkiye ile Kuzey Irak Arasında Tren Hattı Açılıyor*, Zaman, 12 Ocak 2013.

³⁹ *Kirkuk Sensitivity*, The Journal of Turkish Weekly, 15 October 2004.

⁴⁰ With the „normalization” process, the return of those who were forced to migrate from Kirkuk

incomplete normalization process and census made the road map to be null and void. While Iraqi Kurds were advocating that Kirkuk has been a Kurdish city and should be under the Kurdish administration, Turkmens and Arabs have opposed this claim and suggested Kirkuk to have a special status within a united Iraq. In the meantime, the Kirkuk issue also got an international dimension with the intervention of the United Nations (UN) which offered a solution that provides shared governance among Turkmens, Kurds and Arabs at 32% and Christians at 4% rate. Iraqi Parliament also decided on a similar decision. However, this solution as well could not be implemented in reality. When local elections were held on 31 January 2009, Kirkuk was excluded and nothing changed in the administration. Therefore, Turkmens and Arabs protested the provincial council and abdicated. Between 2005 and 2011, several commissions were formed to solve the disputes on assets and demographics, but did not achieve.

In the aftermath of 2007, Turkey's relations with the KRG remarkably evolved from conflictual to cooperative, which can easily be observed in the Kirkuk issue.⁴¹ Between 2003 and 2008, the Kirkuk issue was the main conflictual topic between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish authorities due to their opposing views over the status and identity of Kirkuk. While Turkey has perceived the preservation of the special status of Kirkuk that is composed by Turkmens, Kurds, Arabs and Christians as a guarantee to secure territorial integrity of Iraq, Iraqi Kurdish authorities attempted to control Kirkuk to expand their political and economic power. Therefore, the „*realist-exclusivist approach*”, in which Turkey had underlined its „*red-lines*” at every occasion, was dominant in Turkish foreign policy between 2003 and 2008, regarding the Kirkuk issue.

It seems that the main force behind the easing tension since 2008 is not the changes in the ultimate purpose of both sides. In other words, there is not a sign that the perception of the KRG and Turkey has changed. The visit of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Kirkuk on 2 August 2012 has demonstrated Turkey's ongoing sensitivity about Kirkuk.⁴² In the press conference, Davutoğlu mentioned,

Kirkuk will always have a special and privileged place in our heart. (...) It [Kirkuk] is a city where Turkmen, Arab, Kurdish and Assyrian components have lived in peace for centuries. (...) The primary component of this peaceful city is the Turkmen component that will never disappear. Today, we took another decision

during the Saddam regime and the compensation of injustices were meant.

⁴¹ The Baath Party had created the Kirkuk issue. Within the scope of Arabization policy of the Baath Party, Turkmen and Kurdish population were evacuated from Kirkuk and forced to migrate to southern cities of Iraq between the years of 1975 and 2001. In return, the Arab population was settled in Kirkuk. In the post-Saddam era, however, the Arabization policy of the Baath Party was replaced by the Kurdification policy of the KRG. Since then, the Kirkuk issue has contained not only the dispute over identity, but also the competition over sovereignty in political and economic terms.

⁴² The visit of Davutoğlu was the first visit made by Turkish officials since the visit of İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs, in 1976.

*that made me so happy. We said Konya and Kirkuk become sister cities. (...).*⁴³

As seen from the statement of Davutoğlu, Turkey's sensitivity on Kirkuk and the security of Turkmens still exist. However, Turkey and the KRG managed to reduce the level of tension. It seems that both sides have realized common interests of Kirkuk to have a special status, being a single-governorate region. In this framework, the external factors contributed to that realization. Firstly, the planned withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 contributed to the improvement of Turkey's relations with the KRG. Secondly, the expansion of Iran in the post-Saddam era necessitated Turkey to increase its soft power in the north of Iraq as a part of balancing Iranian influence through the region. Lastly, the economic concerns of Turkey led it to establish stable relations with the KRG in order to access to Kirkuk oil, which would serve to Turkey's energy strategy.⁴⁴

„Trading State”: A New Role?

In accordance with the policy of *zero-problems with neighbors*, improving relations with regional states became an important aspect of the AKP's foreign policy in order to ensure regional stability and security through consolidating economic interdependence. Therefore, AKP adopted the policy of *zero-problems-limitless trade with neighbors*.

Economy had become an important parameter in Turkish foreign policy during the Özal period of the 1980s, as a result of the increasing influence of business circles in foreign policy decision-making. This trend did not last due to heightened security concerns mainly from the north of Iraq in the 1990s, but was reintroduced by the AKP government as part of a strategy to negate regional conflicts. In this framework, it is observed that business-state interaction has increased and the business circles have supported and never challenged the government's policies. In other words, they have backed Turkey's attempt to ensure order in the Middle East through economic interdependence. They also supported the policy of *zero-problems-limitless trade with neighbors*, aiming to reach new markets. As Mustafa Kutlay mentioned, *„the Turkish business elite have begun to explore economic and financial opportunities in neighboring countries, and have backed the state in its efforts to stabilize the region for the sake of their interests, inter alia.”*⁴⁵

The re-introduction of economy as an important parameter of Turkish foreign policy also supported Turkey's role, which was notified by Davutoğlu, *„to expand the sphere of peace and prosperity in its region, and to generate stability and*

⁴³ Davutoğlu ITC'de Konuşma Yaptı, Hürriyet, 2 Ağustos 2012, for full text: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/21131639.asp> (Accessed 17 February 2013).

⁴⁴ Turkey's energy strategy rests on three pillars. The first is to guarantee diversified, reliable and cost-effective supplies for domestic needs. The second is to liberalize its energy market and the third is to become a transit country and energy hub.

⁴⁵ Mustafa KUTLAY, *Economy as the Practical Hand of 'New Turkish Foreign Policy': A Political Economy Explanation*, Insight Turkey 13, N° 1, 2011, 71.

security”.⁴⁶ Regarding the link between the AKP and business circles, Kirişçi argues that „*Turkish foreign policy behavior in the last couple of years has increasingly been shaped by economic considerations – such as export markets, investment opportunities, tourism, energy supplies and the like.*”⁴⁷ In this regard, Kirişçi labels Turkey a „trading state,” using Rosecrance’s term. Rosecrance argued that the world was transforming from a „military political and territorial system” into a „trading world” characterized by economic interdependence.⁴⁸ In his view, this system favors countries that cooperate rather than emphasize military capabilities and struggle for power. It thus becomes preferable to resolve disputes with neighbors in order to promote trade and investment.⁴⁹ Based on this argument, it would not be false to argue that Turkey’s promotion of trade with the KRG, rather than political disputes, is partly a result of its new role in accordance with being a trading state.

Turkey and the KRG have taken concrete steps to deepen economic and energy ties. Mustafa Sever, who is Deputy Minister of Economy, announced that Turkey’s export to Iraq reached to \$10.7 billion in 2012⁵⁰ and Mehmet Cömert, who is Director General of Product Safety and Inspection at the Ministry of Economy, declared that 85% of Turkey’s export has gone to the north of Iraq.⁵¹ In addition, Turkey’s investment in the north of Iraq is quite significant. In 2012, 14% of total investment in the north of Iraq was made by foreign direct investment and Turkey is at the top of the list with its 4% share.⁵² As the time of early 2013, 2.241 foreign firms from 78 countries have been registered in the north of Iraq and 48% of those firms are Turkish.⁵³ As stated by Sinan Çelebi, Minister of Trade and Industry of the KRG, Turkish firms successfully built almost all big building businesses, including hotels, airports, factories and highways in the north of Iraq. Moreover, Çelebi emphasized that Iraqi Kurds mostly prefer to consume Turkish goods in their houses.⁵⁴ Nevaf Kılıç, who is director of Turkey-Iraq Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association, also mentioned that 95% of goods in the shops in Arbil are full by Turkish goods.⁵⁵

Besides the enhancement of Turkey’s export to and investment in the north of

⁴⁶ *Synopsis of the Turkish Foreign Policy*,” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa> (Accessed 9 February 2013).

⁴⁷ Kemal KIRIŞÇI, *The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State*, New Perspectives on Turkey N° 49, 2009, 39.

⁴⁸ Richard ROSECRANCE, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World*, Basic Books, New York, 1986, 40.

⁴⁹ Richard ROSECRANCE, *The Rise of the Virtual State: Wealth and Power in the Coming State*, Basic Books, New York, 1999.

⁵⁰ *Kuzey Irak’a Yabancı Yatırımların İlgisi Büyük Biz Geride Kalmamalıyız*, Zaman, 31 Ocak 2013.

⁵¹ *Kuzey Irak’a Kalitesiz Mal Giremeyecek*, Zaman, 20 Aralık 2012.

⁵² Selen Tonkuş KAREEM, *Interview with Haydar Mustafa Said, Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government’s Official*, Ortadoğu Analiz, Cilt 4, Mart 2012, 23-24.

⁵³ Mithat YURDAKUL, *Irak İhracatı Liginde Yakında 1 Numara Olacak*, Milliyet, 9 Şubat 2013.

⁵⁴ *Kuzey Irak’a Yabancı Yatırımların İlgisi Büyük Biz Geride Kalmamalıyız*, Zaman, 31 Ocak 2013.

⁵⁵ Mithat YURDAKUL, *Irak İhracatı Liginde Yakında 1 Numara Olacak*, Milliyet, 9 Şubat 2013.

Iraq, cooperation in energy field has also been improving. According to the declaration of GAZPROM, Turkey pays \$406, \$300 and \$500 respectively to Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran for every thousand m³ of natural gas that it imports. Taking into account that nearly 48 billion m³ of natural gas was consumed in 2012, Turkey's efforts to diversify natural-gas supporters became understandable.⁵⁶ In this framework, improving energy ties with Iraqi government, especially with the KRG, became significant for Turkey's increasing energy demands. As expected, it creates serious problems at the Ankara-Arbil- Baghdad line. Even though Baghdad has refused to recognize the exploration agreements that have been signed between the KRG and oil companies, the regional government backed these agreements. The main reason of the conflict lies on the struggle for the sovereignty over territory and energy sources. Another serious dispute between Arbil and Baghdad, and between Baghdad and Ankara, was caused by the agreement reached by the KRG and Turkey that suggests the KRG to send crude oil for refinement in Turkey. Despite the discontent of Iraqi government, the KRG started to export some amount of crude oil to Turkey. Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız declared, „Crude purchases from the north of Iraq have begun with a volume of 5-10 road tankers. This may rise to 100-200 tankers a day.“⁵⁷ In addition, KRG's Minister of Oil, Ashti Hawrami, mentioned the willingness to improve energy ties with Turkey. Hawrami stated that the KRG has been selling oil to Turkey in order to meet its needs and working on to construct a pipeline.⁵⁸ He also mentioned that after reaching an agreement with Baghdad, the KRG aims to reach to export 1 million barrel of crude oil per day and to meet Turkey's 15 billion-m³ natural gas need.⁵⁹ In fact, the improving economic ties between Turkey and the KRG became the main base of the „liberal-integrationist approach“, which is seen as an appropriate way to ensure regional security and stability.

Conclusion: Are Good Relations between Turkey and the KRG Sustainable?

As seen, Turkey's relations with the KRG have warmed since 2008, improving political and economic relations. However, there is still an important question to be answered: Would a national role concept in explaining foreign policy behavior be sufficient to predict for the prediction of future foreign policy behavior? and Would the current good relations between Turkey and the KRG be sustainable? Since individuals construct the national role, it may differ for each individual in accordance with their personalities, beliefs, interpretations and external stimulus. Therefore, the answer of the first question is negative. Moreover, the

⁵⁶ Merve ERDİL, *Irak'a Özel Paket Hazırlığı*, Hürriyet Ekonomi, 6 Şubat 2013.

⁵⁷ *Turkey Importing Crude From The north of Iraq in Road Tankers*, Ahramonline, 13 July 2012. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/47584/Business/Economy/Turkey-importing-crude-from-northern-iraq-in-road-.aspx> (Accessed 10 February 2013).

⁵⁸ *Kuzey Irak'tan Türkiye'ye Petrol İhracatı Borularla Yapılacak*, Zaman, 7 Şubat 2013.

⁵⁹ *Kuzey Irak'la Tarihi Ortaklık*, Sabah, 25 Eylül 2012.

rapprochement process between Turkey and the KRG has still been fragile despite the rapid improvement of bilateral relations. First and maybe the most important issue is the uncertainty of the future of PKK. If the „*peace process*” between Turkey and PKK, which aimed at providing a peaceful solution to terrorism, will fail, Turkey’s relations with the KRG will inevitably be influenced in a negative term, as long as PKK finds sanctuary in the north of Iraq.⁶⁰

Secondly, Turkey-KRG rapprochement does not occur in isolation from the dynamics of domestic politics both in Turkey and in Iraq. In Turkey, the warming relation with the KRG is still perceived by some politicians and bureaucrats as a threat to Turkey’s security. Furthermore, the struggle of Syrian Kurdish groups in the north of Syria also led these politicians and bureaucrats to approach more suspiciously towards the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG. It seems that similar suspicion about Turkey exists in the north of Iraq as well. Even though two party coalitions of the KDP and PUK governs the KRG, the influence of other political parties or movements in domestic politics should not be ignored. For instance, Goran, which was founded in 2009 as an opposition to the ruling of two-party coalition in the KRG, is receiving support gradually. There are also Kurdish Islamist parties. While Turkey has established good relations with the KDP, it has approached discreetly to the Kurdish opposition parties. Therefore, it is argued that the improvement of Turkey’s relations with the KRG is mainly dependent on the relations with Turkey and the KDP.⁶¹ Although the opposition parties are currently immature to shape foreign policy behavior of the KRG, it does not mean that they will never come to that level. Therefore, the rising of power of Iraqi Kurdish opposition political movements could reverse the warming relations with Turkey to the distant relations.

Thirdly, the possibility of disintegration of Iraq and the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq, even including territories of Turkey, Syria and Iran, is still alive. Not more than five years ago, Massoud Barzani, President of the KRG, clearly expressed that they aim to declare an independent Kurdish state at reasonable time.⁶² In Turkey as well the number of Kurdish people and officials, who have a dream of establishing an independent Kurdish state, covering Kurds from Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, is significantly high. However, like

⁶⁰ In the time of writing this chapter, the AKP government re-initiated a peace process directly communicating with the jailed leader of PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. Although the particulars of the road map are still remained undisclosed, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that PKK militants should lay down their arms and withdraw from Turkey. What if PKK militants will withdraw from Turkey and join to PKK militants, who have already deployed in the north of Iraq. Bearing in mind the statement of Murat Karayılan, one of the senior leaders of PKK, about welcoming to the withdrawing militants to the Kandil Mountains, it is now invisible how the presence of PKK will influence Turkey’s relations with the KRG in the near future. In other words, the continuation of the PKK presence in the north of Iraq will always have a potential to create conflictual relations with both Turkey and Iraqi central government and Turkey and the KRG, as happened in the past.

⁶¹ Author’s interview with an Iraqi Turkmen politician, who wished to remain anonymous, on 26 February 2013.

⁶² Fikret BİLA, *Kuzey Irak’taki Çelişki*, Milliyet, 28 Şubat 2007.

Iraqi Kurdish officials, they are waiting for a reasonable time to actualize their dream. Therefore, it can be said that since Turkey perceives the unity of Iraq as a requirement for both its own and regional security and stability, it is most likely that Turkey would use its both soft and hard power in any attempt of Iraqi Kurds to detach from central government. In this framework, it would be hard to talk about the sustainability of rapprochement process.

Last but not least, Turkey and the KRG needs more time for confidence building, especially after long-term unstable relations. In conclusion, the rapprochement process would lose its momentum because it is still fragile due to the remaining of unresolved issues related with the security concerns of Turkey and mutual low confidence level. Furthermore, it is also possible to predict that regional developments, notably in Syria, could aggravate the conflictual issues in bilateral relations, triggering contradictory interests of both sides.